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Markus V. Höhne

Newspapers in Hargeysa: Freedom of speech in post-conflict Somaliland¹

Abstract

This article discusses the role of newspapers in the ongoing democratisation process in Somaliland. It shows that, embedded in Somali culture and the recent history of the region, freedom of speech in Hargeysa, the capital of Somaliland, is cultivated by and in print media established after the civil war. Several debates in the newspapers which have centred on sensitive political issues are used to exemplify this point. In some regards, the newspapers continue the legacy of the civil war. Most newspaper owners and journalists participated actively in the guerrilla struggle against the dictatorial regime of Mahamed Siyad Barre. The result of the struggle was secession from Somalia and the independence of Somaliland as a *de facto* state. The country, however, does not enjoy international recognition, and not all inhabitants support its independence. Against this background the newspapers are actively involved in a 'nation-building' struggle that marginalises a significant part of the population and harbours the potential for renewed civil war in the region.

Keywords

Somaliland, Somalia, print media, democratisation, conflict

Freedom of expression is an important part of modern democracies. Simultaneously, it is a 'scarce commodity' in many African societies burdened with political oppression or civil war. It is all the more astonishing to find in Somaliland in north-western Somalia – a region that was long known for dictatorship, violence, and war – daily and weekly newspapers that are well-functioning, outspoken, and critical of the government. Very sensitive topics are regularly discussed in the local newspapers. This shows that freedom of speech is guaranteed in Somaliland. The papers allow their readers to follow important political developments in their country, and also internationally, and to make informed choices, for example, about candidates during elections. Consequently, I argue that the newspapers printed in the capital city Hargeysa clearly contribute to the establishment of a democratic

¹ I am grateful to the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology in Halle/Saale, and the Graduate School Asia and Africa in World Reference Systems at the University of Halle for having supported my PhD studies. Thomas Bierschenk, Olaf Zenker, Tilo Grätz, Kelly M. Askew, Tobias Hagmann, Günther Schlee, Boobe Yuusuf Ducaale, and the anonymous reviewers of *Afrika Spectrum* helped to upgrade the quality of the paper. I thank Marja Tiilikainen for sending me the Somali text of the *Xeerka Saxaafadda* (the Press Law).

political system. On the other hand, both historically and with regard to their staff, the newspapers are a product of the civil war and the struggle for liberation. Most of the print media producers participated in the fighting against the regime of Mahamed Siyad Barre in Somalia. This guerrilla war led to the secession and independence of Somaliland in 1991. It has to be stressed, though, that not all inhabitants of today's Somaliland were involved in the anti-Siyad Barre campaign. A considerable number of people belonging to clans residing in the east of Somaliland supported the previous government until its end. Even today they do not accept Somaliland's secession from Somalia.

Against this background, I argue further that the guerrilla legacy heavily biases the reporting on issues touching upon the position of Somaliland as an independent state. This brings about two serious problems with respect to the ongoing democratisation process in the country: first, the uncompromising stance of the newspapers on Somaliland's independence excludes the perspective of a significant minority that is critical about the secession of Somaliland. Second, openly propagandistic reports in the papers on the conflict in the Sool region have the potential to contribute to serious political tensions and the escalation of violence within Somaliland.

The situation of newspapers in Somaliland relates to the more general discussion on media in Africa. Media organisations are confronted with a number of political and 'technical' problems. Nyamnjoh (2005) emphasises that lack of technology, know-how, and professionalism as well as exposure to persisting autocratic and neo-patrimonial regimes and (civil) war negatively influence the work of the media in Africa. Like oral and written sources in general, radio, newspapers, Internet homepages, and TV are frequently involved in justifying war, mobilising supporters, re-establishing honour, undermining the morale of the enemy, and so on, as recent studies of historical and contemporary cases from the Horn of Africa show (Barnes and Carmichael 2006; Barnes 2006; Reid 2006). The particular circumstances of some African media yield very disparate results. In parts of Somalia and Sierra Leone, for example, where regime change has escalated into civil war, journalists face repression to the point of being detained and killed on the orders of political or military leaders (BBC 2003; Gordon 2004). At the same time, under circumstances of civil war and statelessness, specific forms of 'guerrilla journalism' (Gordon 2004: 188) can develop that have the potential to build social trust and lead to (democratic) reforms (ibid.: 188-191). This article shows that newspapers in Somaliland currently occupy a position somewhere between guerrilla journalism and state control, with journalists, the government, and the public trying to find the exact balance between freedom of expression and political stability.

The data used for this article originate from my field research in northern Somalia between September 2003 and December 2004. My focus was on local dynamics of identity formation and conflict in the region. In addition to using the socio-anthropological method of participant observation, I conducted dozens of open and semi-structured interviews with ordinary people, members of the political elite, former guerrilla fighters, and journalists. Field research was conducted in different places all over northern Somalia. One of

my key informants worked for the paper *Jamhuuriya* in Hargeysa. I accompanied him several times during his working hours. Additionally, I spent time in the offices of *Jamhuuriya* and *Haatuf*, and collected and archived copies of all available daily and weekly newspapers for later analysis. Therefore, the empirical part of this article is based on material gathered in 2003 and 2004. Information on more recent events was obtained through telephone interviews and e-mail contact with journalists and local intellectuals, as well as via Internet research.

In the following section, I briefly introduce Somaliland. Thereafter, I discuss freedom of speech, and its embeddedness in Somali society and culture.² A sketch of the recent history of the media in Somaliland provides the background for understanding the present-day situation of newspapers in Hargeysa. The main part of the article deals with the current position of the free press in the country and the ways in which highly sensitive political issues are presented in the papers.

Locating Somaliland

Somaliland, in the north-west of the Somali peninsula, was formerly a British protectorate. The rest of the territory, extending from the north-east to the south of the peninsula, was under Italian administration. Somaliland gained independence on 26 June 1960. Five days later Italian Somaliland followed, and both united to form the Republic of Somalia. The union was ridden with problems. The different administrative traditions did not fit easily together. Moreover, power was concentrated in the south. This soon led to tensions within some segments of the northern elite. Post-colonial Somalia attracted huge amounts of external support during the decades of the cold war. Different Somali governments ruled by redistributing externally acquired resources among their relatives and followers. This neo-patrimonial system reached its zenith under Mahamed Siyad Barre (1969–1991). Somali nationalism had gained momentum in the late colonial period. In the form of Pan-Somalism it dominated Somalia's post-colonial foreign policy. Under Barre it served, together with 'scientific socialism', as an official ideology, masking internal (clan-)divisions. Following Somalia's defeat in the Ogadeen-war against Ethiopia (1977–78), Barre's rule became increasingly exclusive and dictatorial. Tensions finally escalated into a war waged mostly by clan-based guerrilla organisations against the regime (Lewis 2002; Bakonyi 2001). After a decade of struggle, the Somali government was toppled in early 1991. While the civil war between various guerrilla movements escalated in southern Somalia, the situation in the north-west developed quite differently. Here the Somali National Movement (SNM) took control when the government fell. Subsequently, guerrillas, traditional authorities, and local intellectuals nego-

² This article is mostly concerned with freedom of speech as a sub-category of freedom of expression. Occasionally, when appropriate, the broader term 'freedom of expression' is used. The latter, according to Scanlon (1972: 206), includes almost everything from acts of speech to displays of symbols and the failure to display them. As *terminus technicus* it appears in many documents and discussions referring to democracy and human rights.

tiated peace between the different clans in the region, which had been on opposed sides during the previous civil war (Farah and Lewis 1997). Accommodating the agenda of the majority of the SNM supporters, and in order to stabilise the region in the face of the unfolding chaos in the south, Somaliland seceded unilaterally and was declared an independent state at a community conference in May 1991.

Initially, the country was highly unstable. The incompetence of the political leadership, which lay in the hands of the guerrillas, and factionalism within the SNM led to several violent conflicts in Somaliland during the first years of independence. A more stable and peaceful social and political order was not achieved until the mid-1990s. Civilian politicians took over the government. They introduced a new currency (the Somaliland shilling) and initiated the transformation from a clan democracy, based on power sharing between the most important descent groups, to a multi-party democracy (Cabdiraxmaan 2005; Renders 2006). Recently, the new system has proven its stability in a series of successful democratic elections (Bradbury et al. 2003; Höhne 2007a; Ciabbari forthcoming). The major problems that remain for this newly emerging state are a lack of economic resources, the lack of international recognition, and, as will be outlined below, internal political tensions related to the previous secession and the ongoing civil war in Somalia.

Freedom of speech in the Somali context

Traditionally, important matters of daily life within Somali society are discussed at meetings called *shir*. These meetings are held under the auspices of traditional authorities, and at them every adult male has a say in the affairs of the group or groups involved. Yet, rhetorical skills, wealth, and special knowledge as well as simple group size add value to one's speech (Lewis 1961: 196-198). The process of decision-taking at a *shir* is consensus-oriented and governed by certain rules. Lewis (ibid.: 199) pointed out that despite

a great deal of argument and wrangling, all those present are expected to behave courteously and breaches of good manners may be punished.

More generally, news is greatly valued in northern Somali society. This might be related to the pastoral nomadism that is still an important part of the regional economy. Nomads usually try to gather as much information as possible about the current environmental conditions in specific locales. This attitude is expressed, for example, in the common greeting '*iska warran*' (tell the news) and in several proverbs, such as '*War la helaa talo la heelaa*' (if news is found, advice is found) or '*War baa u gaajo kulul*' (the hunger for news is worst). Likewise, Boobe (2005: 123) argues that since pre-colonial times, Somalis have been accustomed to a 'well-preserved pattern of freedoms', including freedom of speech and freedom of movement. Yet, these general statements have to be qualified, since the egalitarian spirit and the mentioned freedoms mostly concern men.

Much of this 'pastoral democracy' was left intact by the colonial and early post-colonial governments. Only when the democratic government was toppled by a group of military officers in October 1969 did the political cir-

cumstances under which Somalis expressed their opinions change considerably. For the next 21 years the people in Somalia lived under an increasingly restrictive dictatorship. Immediately after the coup the new government under Mahamed Siyad Barre curtailed rights of assembly and expression. The publication of all privately owned newspapers (nine at the time) was prohibited (Samatar 1988: 85). The only legal media in Somalia under the Barre regime were two radio stations (Radio Mogadishu and Radio Hargeysa), one television station, one daily newspaper (Xiddigta Oktoobar/October Star), and a few periodicals. They were state-owned and under the control of the Ministry for Information and National Guidance. Their function was to 'canonise' the dictator and his regime (Samatar 1988: 110; BBC 2003; Jamal 2006: 15, 19, 24).

To diverge from this restricted path and claim freedom of expression and freedom of speech outside of government control meant to risk one's life: In 1975 ten Sheikhs were executed in Mogadishu. They had publicly spoken out against the new Family Act, under which equal rights were granted to men and women. In another case a group of voluntary community workers in Hargeysa was detained in 1981. In the following show trial, some of them were accused, among other charges, of being behind a regime-critical underground newsletter called *ufo*, meaning 'whirl-wind' in Somali. The members of the group were sentenced to long prison sentences in high security prisons and had to spend years in solitary confinement (Samatar 1988: 109; Jama 2003).

After a decade of guerrilla war the Barre regime was overthrown in January 1991. Subsequently, the guerrillas did not manage to establish a new and effective government. To the contrary, they split and started fighting each other for control of local resources and political power (Prunier 1995). This context of state collapse also shaped the media landscape. Since the end of the dictatorship, a variety of new radio stations, newspapers, and, more recently, TV stations and Internet sites have been established. But they have 'operated in a dangerous environment that undermines both professional journalism and press freedom' (BBC 2003). This situation has continued up to the present in most parts of southern Somalia.³ In the north-west of Somalia, however, where the Somali National Movement (SNM) came to power in 1991, the political and media landscape has developed quite differently.

The development of the media in Somaliland

When the independent Republic of Somaliland was declared in May 1991, the capital city Hargeysa as well as large parts of the country lay in ruins. The rebuilding of the basic infrastructure and the stabilisation of the internal political structure of Somaliland were complicated by internal conflicts and a lack of external support (Gilkes 1993; Cabdiraxmaan 2005: 59-61; own interviews Hargeysa 2003/04). The first newspapers were established in Hargeysa as early as 1991 in the context of violence and political chaos. They con-

³ For insightful analyses of the current situation in southern Somalia, see Menkhaus (2006) and Marchal (2007).

sisted of a few dozen hand-printed leaflets with names such as *Ileys* (Light), *Codka Hargeysa* (The Voice of Hargeysa), *Xorriyo* (Independence/Freedom), and *Jamhuuriya* (The Republican). But freedom of expression was again threatened. Abdullahi Omar, one of the founders of *Codka Hargeysa*, described the problems journalists faced in the times of 'anarchy':

During those times, the militias would kidnap journalists that produced articles or cartoons that were against the government (A Taste of Africa 2004).

Over the years, the technology for producing newspapers in Somaliland improved. In 1993 the first printing press was set up in Hargeysa, and two years later the National Printing Press (NPP) was established in the city (Boobe 2005: 155). In 2004 three such presses existed in the capital of Somaliland, of which one was state and two were privately owned. Parallel to these developments, the number of printed copies grew from a few dozen in 1991 to one to two thousand per journal per day 13 years later. In 2004 the three major daily newspapers produced in Somaliland were *Maandeeq*, *Jamhuuriya*, and *Haatuf*. All of them had a weekly issue in English (*Maandeeq/The Horn Tribune*, *Jamhuuriya/The Republican*, *Haatuf/Somaliland Times*). *Maandeeq* was produced under the auspices of the Ministry for Information and National Guidance of Somaliland. The other two journals were privately owned and were considered to be independent from the government (Hassan 2005; Boobe 2005: 168).

According to my own observations, the journalists are typically young men between 20 and 30 years old. The leading figures in the press, who were often among those who started the newspapers in the early 1990s, are men over 40, such as Faisal Ali Sheikh and Hassan Siid Yusuf of *Jamhuuriya* and Yusuf Abdi Gaboobe, who was initially with *Jamhuuriya* and established *Haatuf* in 2001. In the past they were university students, businessmen, and often also supporters or active members of the SNM. A number of these journalists started as autodidacts. In 2003, however, the BBC launched a two-year training programme for journalists in the capital of Somaliland. It ended in 2005 and was considered a great success by Somaliland's media people (Jamal 2006: 46-50).

The newspapers are distributed and sold by boys between 10 and 15 years old in the streets of Hargeysa.⁴ A part of the print run is transported by car or plane to other towns in Somaliland, such as Boroma, Buro, and Erigabo, and sold there. Of course, the number of a few thousand copies per day seems to be very low when compared with a population of about half a million in Hargeysa alone. Nonetheless, I argue that the newspapers have a considerable impact on the formation of public opinion and are an important democratic medium because they are read collectively. It is very common to observe crowds of people, typically men, at street corners or in teahouses reading a journal together. Furthermore, in the course of the day an issue is passed from hand to hand among friends or acquaintances. Women, for example the many female *Qaad* sellers and money changers sitting in the streets of the city centre, also read the papers regularly, and young people and

⁴ In 2004 the issue price was 1,500 Somaliland Shillings, which was at the time around twenty-five US cents.

Somalis in the diaspora access the journals online.⁵ Considering the Somali way of asking for and sharing news, the top stories of the day spread very quickly among the population. This qualifies the argument of the BBC (2003) that the low literacy rate in Somalia and Somaliland limits the readership for print media. Radio complements the media scene of course. In many African societies, including Somali society, it is *the* medium for providing information – but mostly under tight governmental control (Hyden and Okigbo 2002: 39 and 45; Okibo 2000: 71).

People in Somaliland listen to Radio Hargeysa and BBC Somali Service daily and intensively. However, Radio Hargeysa is government-owned, and so far it is prohibited to launch any independent radio station. BBC Somali Service broadcasts four times a day and covers world news as well as all Somali-related issues in the Horn of Africa and in the diaspora.⁶ The daily newspapers in Hargeysa thus remain of singular importance as providers of local, Somaliland-specific, and government-critical information. These observations support Boobe's assertion that

the newspapers dominate political commentary in Hargeysa, and have considerable influence within the Somaliland community as a whole (Boobe 2005: 155-156).

Politics and the papers

In 2003 the Somaliland Journalist Association (SOLJA) and the Society for Somaliland Independent Journalists and Writers (SSJW) were founded. They were complimented by the Women's Journalists Association (WOJA) in 2006, which prints a monthly paper called *Almis*. These organisations represent the interests of the country's journalists today. In addition, the Mogadishu-based Somali Journalists Network (SOJON) is also active in Somaliland.⁷ SOJON produced a report on 'Cases of abuse of the press in Somalia' covering the first half of 2004.⁸ Here, among other threats to the freedom of the press in Somalia, the elaboration and adoption of the Press Law (Xeerka Saxaafadda), law (xeer) no. 27/2004, in Somaliland in early 2004 was highlighted. The adoption of a law organising the work of the press was prescribed in art-

⁵ See: www.jamhuuriya.info; www.haatuf.net; www.maandeeq.com. A separate paper edition of *Jamhuuriya* is issued in London for the large Somali community there.

⁶ In 2003/04, at least one more radio station – Radio Lasanod – operated locally. It could do so because the town of Lasanod in the Sool region lay outside the control of the government in Hargeysa. All over Somalia various privately owned stations operate, all on FM with limited reach. Voice of America (VOA) reintroduced a Somali programme in early 2007; it had first broadcast in Somali during the US-UN-led intervention in southern Somalia in the early 1990s (Jamal 2006: 15-18).

⁷ SOJON was renamed the 'National Union of Somali Journalists' (NUSOJ) in 2005. In this article, most of the sources date from 2004 and therefore still refer to SOJON.

⁸ The report is available at www.ifj.org/pdfs/Somalia2004.pdf [accessed 01.11.2006]. It is important to note that Somaliland is presented by its political elite and the majority of its inhabitants as an independent country. The fact that SOJON uses the term 'Somalia' as including Somaliland runs counter to the self-identification of many people in Somaliland.

icle 32 of the constitution of Somaliland to deal with the 'freedom of public demonstration and expression of opinion, as well as freedom of the press and other mass media' (Constitution of the Republic of Somaliland). The controversial Press Law had been discussed by the public before its adoption. The Somaliland newspapers, the journalist associations SOLJA and SSJW, and the (transnational) Somaliland civil society opposed the first draft of the law as antipodal to freedom of expression (Somaliland Times 105/24.01.2004: 4; The Republican 282/24.-30.01.2004; Somaliland Forum 09.02.2004). The final version of the law was influenced by these discussions, to the benefit of the media.

The Press Law specifies in articles 6 and 7 that organs and individuals engaging in the publication of information must register with the government. Article 8 outlines the rights of the journalists to protection under the law, to access to information, and so forth. The obligations of the media are described in article 10, for example, to report truthfully, to respect Islamic religion, and not to reveal military secrets. These latter provisions might provide potential for abuse by the government, particularly in the light of the conflict in the Sool region, which I outline below.

During my stay in Somaliland, until November 2004, it seemed that the law did not actually change much regarding the 'daily life' of the newspapers – for the better or for the worse. I could observe that the newspapers continued to launch sensitive and controversial discussions. At the same time, journalists were occasionally arrested on the orders of government officials only to be released shortly afterwards following public protest (SOJON 2004; Reporters Without Borders 24.03.2005).

Four years later, at the time of finalising this article, a more substantial evaluation of the law's impact on the media scene is possible. On the one hand, several journalists told me in early 2007 that the law is acceptable to the press in Somaliland and does not endanger freedom of expression (telephone interviews by author, April 2007). On the other hand, recent events in Hargeysa cast some shadows on the relations between government and media.⁹ On 2 January 2007 armed police raided the office of Haatuf/Somaliland Times. The managing editor, Yusuf Abdi Gaboobe, who resisted the operation, and the editor, Ali Abdi Diini, were arrested without warrants. Later, two more journalists, Muhammad Omar Sheekh and Muhammad-Rashid M. Farah, were detained (CPJ 03.01. 2007; Somaliland Times 268/10.03.2007). The crackdown on Haatuf took place in connection with articles published between late November 2006 and early January 2007 which criticised President Dahir Rayaale Kahin's handling of a land dispute in Boroma, his home town, and accused his wife of corruption (CPJ 18.01.2007; Somaliland Times 262/27.01.2007).

In reaction, SOLJA, civil society representatives, SNM veterans, and international human rights organisations protested the arrest of the journalists and the government's plan to charge them under the Penal Code (The Republican online edition/06.01.2007; The Republican online edition/ 03.03.2007; Somaliland Times 263/03.03.2007; Ibrahim 27.01.2007; CPJ 03.01.2007; AI 19.02.2007).¹⁰ Despite these interventions, the Hargeysa Regional Court proceeded with the

⁹ I followed up on the events outlined below via Internet, telephone, and e-mail.

charges. The trial took place in an improvised court room in the Mandera Police Academy near the port of Berbera. The journalists' lawyers protested against the procedures and finally boycotted the concluding session. On 4 March 2007 the court sentenced Yusuf Abdi Gaboobe to two years imprisonment for hindering the police in carrying out its operation. The other three journalists were sentenced to two years and five months for 'insulting the good name and honour of the Head of State and for inciting the national forces of Somaliland to rebel against the state and encouraging the general public to riot and engage in acts of public disorder against the state'. In addition, the court ordered the Haatuf Media Network (HMN), the publisher of Haatuf and Somaliland Times, to pay a fine and called for the suspension of the HMN's licence (Somaliland Times 268/10.03.2007; Ibrahim 20.01.2007). On 29 March 2007, President Dahir Rayaale Kahin pardoned the four journalists.

The impact of these events on freedom of expression in Somaliland was considerable. The case shows that, first, the Xeerka Saxaafadda (the Press Law) is ambiguous regarding the sanctions that apply to journalists in breach of their obligations under article 10 of this law. Second, the government obviously does not feel obliged to follow civil law procedures when charging journalists. Third, the holding of court proceedings in a police station in an improvised court room far away from Hargeysa could be interpreted as unwillingness on the side of the government to adhere to democratic procedures. Since the journalists were pardoned only a few weeks after their conviction, the events could also be understood as a – rather rough – demonstration of force towards journalists in Somaliland, who admittedly do not always heed their obligation to deal with information with care.¹¹

While the Haatuf journalists returned to their workplace and HMN continues to publish its newspapers, it recently became clear that the events of early 2007 have further repercussions. In November 2007 the Somaliland government sent a new bill on press and publications to the House of Representatives. This bill is currently being discussed in the parliament and the public. The newspapers and civil society members reject the new proposal (a joint press statement 16.11.2007; [Qaran](#) Party). It was modelled after the Yemeni law on press and publication. In its section three, the new law gives considerable powers to the minister of information, who has the right to issue the necessary licence and, in case of changes or non-compliance with provisions outlined in the law, to withdraw it again. Section five includes the prohibitions and penal provisions. Article 98 in particular outlines a number of far-reaching prescriptions, interdicting the publication of anything which may cause social discord and division among the people of Somaliland, and which runs counter to the principles of national sovereignty and the unity of

¹⁰ The Penal Code was drafted in 1962 and came into force in the Somali Republic in 1964. In the absence of a reformed code, it is still in effect in Somaliland.

¹¹ On the telephone, not everyone described the convicted *Haatuf* journalists as being innocent. Furthermore, none of the journalists with whom I talked stated that they felt threatened by the events. Business seemed to continue 'as usual'. However, another source stated, 'The message reached the media.'

the country (article 98 c and d).¹² According to an article by Ibrahim Hashi Jama in Jamhuuriya (07.01.2008), this new bill

introduces considerable criminal sanctions, such as fines and imprisonment (Article 99) [...] confiscation of property, including printing presses (Article 101) and seizure of printed materials (Article 102).

The author continues that the penal code which currently is in force in Somaliland dates back to the Somali Penal Code of 1962. This code includes the crime of insulting the president and blaming him for the actions of the government, which was used by the court when convicting the Haatuf journalists in March 2007 (ibid.).

Against this background, it becomes clear that the government in Hargeysa considers the Press Law of 2004 unsatisfactory. The authorities actively undermined this law during the procedures leading to the conviction of the Haatuf journalists. Subsequently, a new bill was handed over to the parliament for consideration in November 2007. Somaliland's journalists and civil society members are worried about this new bill. It is considerably more restrictive than the previous law of 2004 and introduces far-ranging prohibitions and criminal sanctions.

Politics in the papers

Two prominent and highly sensitive topics discussed in the newspapers during 2003 and 2004 were the position of Somaliland towards Somalia and the conflict between Somaliland and Puntland over the control of the Sool region.¹³

The issue of Somaliland's independence

The government in Hargeysa and a large number of Somaliland supporters in the country demand international recognition for their republic. The achievements of the country since 1991 and the historical, cultural, and political features separating Somaliland from the rest of Somalia are highlighted in this context (Höhne 2006: 401-404). So far, however, the international community has focused on rebuilding Somalia as a centralised state within the borders of 1990. Between October 2002 and January 2005 an internationally sponsored peace and reconciliation conference for Somalia took place in Kenya. From the perspective of the participants of the conference, the people of Somaliland were included in the process via clan representation (Schlee 2006: 127-129). Of course, the government in Hargeysa officially refused to participate. However, as the process in Kenya took shape, tensions in Somaliland rose. The question was how Somaliland's situation would develop if an interna-

¹² I refer here to the unofficial English translation of the bill that is available from www.somalilandlaw.com.

¹³ In order to keep the sources manageable, I refer only to the discussions presented in *The Republican*. The positions expressed in the other privately owned weekly and daily newspapers did not differ substantially from *The Republican's* view. Only the government owned *Mandeeq* and *The Horn Tribune* had different positions on some issues, which, however, are not my focus here.

tionally recognised Somali government would start to work in Mogadishu. Suspicions arose time and again in Hargeysa that influential individuals and groups in Somaliland were pursuing a secret agenda to unify Somaliland and Somalia for their own benefit.

In September 2003 *The Republican* published an attack by KULMIYE, Somaliland's leading opposition party, against the Somaliland government. Among other things, the government was accused of being 'behind those who are advocating to reconcile some of the factions in Somalia' (*The Republican* 267/20.-26.09.2003: 1). According to the article, traditional leaders from Somaliland were planning to participate in a peace conference organised by southern Somali politicians in Mogadishu.¹⁴ This conference was presented as an 'intrigue to revive the unity of Somalia and Somaliland', and all participants from the Somaliland side were considered to be 'traitors' (*ibid.*). The minister for information and national guidance reacted in another article in the same issue. He refuted the announcement of the participation of Somaliland traditional authorities at a conference in Mogadishu as fabricated. The minister reiterated that Somaliland could only be represented by its legally elected government. At the same time he confirmed that two traditional authorities were mediating between groups in conflict in southern Somalia with the consent of the government. According to the minister, this had nothing to do with the planned conference in Mogadishu (*The Republican* 267/20.-26.09.2003: 1; 8). One week later *The Republican* issued a press release from Sultan Hassan, a traditional leader from the Hargeysa area. The sultan confirmed that some traditional leaders from Somaliland were involved in peace negotiations in southern Somalia. He spoke of these endeavours as being against the interest and sovereignty of Somaliland and called upon other traditional authorities to 'have a common view and hold a meeting to save Somaliland' (*The Republican* 268/27.09.-03.10.2003: 1). The next edition of the newspaper printed a number of statements from high-ranking politicians and traditional authorities on the issue. The president of Somaliland distanced himself from any peace mission to the south. The House of Elders spoke of the actions of individuals designed 'to dismantle the existence of the Republic of Somaliland as an independent state' (*The Republican* 269/04.-10.10.2003: 1). The spokesman of KULMIYE accused the government of having been aware of the negotiation efforts for a long time and made it responsible for all possible negative effects on Somaliland. A sultan who spoke on behalf of a group of elders that was involved in the mission to Somalia emphasised that they had tried to negotiate peace in accordance with Islamic law and Somali traditions. He reiterated that his group would consult the Somaliland government and intellectuals regarding further steps (*ibid.*: 1; 8).

The discussion was finally closed with the rejection of the peace mission. The government of Somaliland did not have to face more criticism. Yet, only three weeks later, new doubts surfaced regarding the loyalty of leading

¹⁴ This was not the conference in Kenya (Oct. 2004–Jan. 2005), but a more local initiative initiated by the then still-existing Transitional National Government (TNG) established in Arta (Djibouti) in 2000. The TNG was dissolved in 2003 and replaced by the Transitional Federal Government (TFG) headed by President Abdullahi Yusuf, which is currently involved in Somali affairs.

politicians to an independent Somaliland. The Republican printed an interview with President Ismail Omar Gelle of Djibouti. The title of the interview was 'Contrary to what Somaliland thinks we support a united Somalia' (The Republican 273/01.-07.11.2003: 1). The next issue of the newspaper featured a statement from the chairman of the KULMIYE party: 'This is the first time I doubted the loyalty of the president of Somaliland' (The Republican 274/08.-14.11.2003: 1). In this article the opposition leader emphasised that the president of Somaliland had recently described the relations between Somaliland and Djibouti as good. Referring then to Ismail Omar Gelle's dismissal of Somaliland's independence, the opposition leader stated that 'this was an intrigue that the President [of Somaliland] did not understand, otherwise it is high treason' (The Republican 274/08.-14.11.2003: 1). The reply of the Somaliland president was printed in the same issue. He accused the opposition leader of stirring conflict with Somaliland's neighbour Djibouti and emphasised his government's work for peace in the region (ibid.).

This is only a small extract of the long-standing discussion on the position of Somaliland towards Somalia that continued throughout 2004. The debates presented above show that the newspapers facilitated open and diverse discussions on highly sensitive and controversial issues. The Republican, as an independent and government-critical paper, highlighted the positions of the national opposition parties in Somaliland, but it also provided the government with an opportunity to voice its position. It is striking that, despite the unstable and unclear standing of Somaliland in world politics as a self-declared but not internationally recognised state, the government tolerated such debates.

Towards the end of the Somali peace conference in Kenya, the openness of discussion declined. In July 2004 the minister of interior, on behalf of the government, banned all public debates on the political situation. This ban was supposedly designed to prevent the opposition parties and civil society organisations from holding public conferences and meetings on the matter. Additionally, the minister explicitly warned the media to refrain from 'disseminating anything that might disrupt national security and stability' (The Republican 305/24.-30.07.2004: 8). The ban was heavily criticised in the newspapers by one of the opposition leaders and a prominent figure of the local civil society, who both called it illegal and unconstitutional (ibid.).

In my understanding, these discussions nevertheless indicate that freedom of speech is guaranteed in Somaliland. Embedded in the Somali culture of outspokenness and accustomed to the 'absolute' freedom that reigned after the collapse of the state in 1991, the press in Somaliland developed a government-critical attitude. A decade later the democratically elected government set out to put limits on this absolute press freedom. The discussion about the Press Law and the positive reactions to its final version in early 2004 on the part of the media showed that it was possible to find an acceptable balance between freedoms and limits. The push by the government to prevent public debate on the status of Somaliland later that year did not hamper discussion in the long run.¹⁵ Yet, what seemed in 2004 to be a decis-

¹⁵ The following anecdote illustrates that the newspapers had not lost their edge: In January 2006 I met the president of Somaliland and the minister of information upon their visit to Germany. As a small present I handed them a collection of Somaliland's daily

ive step towards anchoring freedom of expression in the Press Law has to be re-evaluated against the backdrop of the events during 2007. These make clear that the negotiations about the limits and freedom of media in Somaliland are continuing.

Coming back to the second part of my initial argument, I outline in the remainder of the article that despite the general freedom of speech, some issues are discussed in a very one-sided way. This affects the ongoing democratisation process as well as peace and stability in Somaliland.

The conflict in the Sool region

In late December 2003, Puntland police forces occupied Lasanod, the capital of the Sool region. The government of Somaliland perceives this region as part of its eastern state territory. However, Puntland, which was established in 1998 and according to its constitution is part of a future federal Somalia, claims Sool as Harti territory. Harti is a clan confederation comprising the Dhulbahante, Warsangeeli, Majeerteen, and some smaller clans. It constitutes the social and political basis of Puntland. The Sool region is predominantly inhabited by Dhulbahante.

Throughout January 2004 The Republican headlined with aggressive statements by Somaliland's politicians, such as 'war is inevitable' (The Republican 279/03.-09.01.2004: 1) or 'we will go to war if forced [to]' (The Republican 280/10.-16.01.2004: 1). Troops were sent to the region and positioned along a front approximately 30 km west of Lasanod. The discourse in Hargeysa was that these troops would close Somaliland's border in the east (The Republican 279-282/033.-30.01.2004). Yet, during field research I could observe myself how for the next eight months the Somaliland troops faced the Puntland military, which established itself in and around Lasanod, without any significant movements or incidents. The Republican continued to print occasional reports reminding people in Hargeysa about the situation in the east. The articles highlighted the alleged discontent of the population in Lasanod with the Puntland troops (The Republican 293/17.-23.04.2004; The Republican 301/12.-18.06.2004). My own contacts and observations in the region, particularly in Lasanod, indicated rather an acceptance of the Puntland troops by the local people as 'fellow' Harti.

In March 2004 a Kenyan employee of the German development organisation GTZ (Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit) was assassinated in an attack near Berbera in western Somaliland. The Republican printed as a first reaction a statement of the minister of interior, who proclaimed that '[the] TNG and Puntland are behind [the] assassination' (The Republican 290/20.-26.03.2004: 1).¹⁶ Further evidence to substantiate this accusation was not provided. However, as I heard later, this announcement contributed to the escalation of violence

newspapers on CD ROM (after field research my newspaper collection was scanned and saved as PDF files). In reaction, the minister asked half-ironically, 'Why did you collect all the bad things they [the newspapers] wrote about us?'

¹⁶ The Transitional National Government (TNG) existed between 2000 and 2003. It claimed to represent Somalia as a whole but in fact could not even control the Somali capital.

in the aftermath of a spontaneous 'anti-terror' demonstration in Hargeysa. Some people attacked the shops and houses of southern Somalis or people belonging to the Harti clan federation associated with Puntland. In July 2004 The Republican printed an article in which a Somaliland minister, who by clan originated from the Lasanod area, called on the people to safeguard Somaliland and to go to war over Sool. The minister was cited with the words that

'[t]here is no better cause than to fight in defence of one's country or to be a martyr [...]. I wonder why the people of Somaliland are not fighting for their territory that is missing' (The Republican 304/17.-23.07.2004: 1).

In fact, fighting escalated between the Somaliland and Puntland troops on the front in late October 2004. The Republican headline read 'Somaliland Marches to Secure its Eastern Border' (The Republican 319/30.10.-05.11.2004: 1). The article spoke of 60 dead and 23 captured Puntland soldiers; the losses on the Somaliland side were said to be nine dead and 11 wounded (The Republican 319/30.10.-05.11.2004: 1; 2). At that time I stayed in Hargeysa. Shortly after the fighting I called informants in Lasanod. They told me that on each side about 15 soldiers had been killed and 20 captured. While both sides might have had an interest in distorting the facts, it was remarkable that the newspapers in Hargeysa unconditionally sided with the government and never even tried to accommodate some more moderate or alternative views. In my interpretation, this was not a simple mistake but systematic misinformation on the side of the newspapers. Their aim was to evoke patriotism in the centre of Somaliland and to discredit 'the enemy' – who actually inhabits parts of the 'own' country. Many Dhulbahante residing, from the Hargeysa perspective, in eastern Somaliland are Somali nationalists who desire the re-establishment of a stable Somalia (Höhne 2006: 405-409). Their highest-ranking traditional authorities accepted the secession of Somaliland in 1991 only because the SNM was the superior military force in north-western Somalia (Höhne 2007b: 169-170). The alternative would have been continued civil war in the region.¹⁷

When Puntland was established in 1998, most Dhulbahante supported this new political entity in north-eastern Somalia. Patrilinear descent (from Harti) and the common political agenda of rebuilding Somalia within the borders of 1990 tied the Dhulbahante closely to Puntland. Nevertheless, many members of the clan also preserved ties to Hargeysa and Somaliland after 1998. Therefore, the Dhulbahante clan and the Sool region were 'split' between both political entities in northern Somalia (Höhne 2006: 410).

This situation changed in December 2003, as outlined above. In Lasanod, I could observe that the Puntland troops were mostly welcomed as 'brothers' by the local population. It has to be noted, however, that despite a certain genealogical and political proximity, the Dhulbahante and the Majeer-

¹⁷ In the Somali civil war 'clan' became the dominant marker of group identity. For a most insightful discussion on this topic, see Luling (2006). The SNM was dominated by the Isaaq clan family. The Dhulbahante clan is part of the Darood clan family, to which Siyad Barre also belonged. Many Dhulbahante supported the late president of Somalia until his fall. However, descent is never definitive. During the guerrilla and civil wars, individuals from the same descent group could be found on different sides (Liban 2006).

teen, the politically dominant clan within the Harti clan-confederation, also have significant differences. This has prevented the full integration of the Dhulbahante territory into Puntland in the past. The reasons why the Puntland troops invaded in December 2003 are complex. It seems that for the Puntland government, the confrontation with Somaliland helped to distract attention from internal problems.¹⁸ At the same time, Abdullahi Yusuf, then still the president of Puntland, was active at the Somali peace conference in Kenya. The possibilities that a new Somali government could be established soon and that the president of Puntland could become the new president of Somalia also contributed to the opening of Lasanod towards the Puntland side. Another factor involved in the events was that in late 2003 a violent conflict had escalated between two Dhulbahante sub-clans in the countryside near Lasanod. The vice president of Puntland at the time, Mahamed Abdi Hashi, was from one of these sub-clans. In Lasanod people were convinced that he had sent police and military to ease the situation.

To summarise, from the local perspective, the occupation of Lasanod by Puntland forces was not an act of border crossing or interference in the internal affairs of Somaliland. Consequently, for most Dhulbahante, there was no 'border to close', even if people in Hargeysa did not tire of claiming the contrary. Puntland's move was rather the implementation of locally acceptable politics. The political positions of most Dhulbahante were well-known in Hargeysa, but before December 2003 they were ignored.¹⁹ Only when the Puntland military successfully challenged the nominal claim of Hargeysa to administer Sool did Somaliland have to react.²⁰ The newspapers in Hargeysa played their role in this conflict within and about Somaliland by strongly siding with the government and printing calls for war.

Conclusion

In writing this article, I wanted to critically assess the contribution of Somaliland's newspapers to democratisation and political stabilisation in the country. My focus was particularly on government-critical papers. It was shown that freedom of speech, as sub-category of freedom of expression, is an integral part of Somali society. Traditionally, it was cultivated at public

¹⁸ A general election was planned for June 2004 in Puntland, but leading members of the government were not willing to hold the elections. One possibility for avoiding these elections was to press the parliament to approve an extension of the government's term. Given the context of the conflict with Somaliland over Sool, an extension of six months was finally granted.

¹⁹ While the newspapers are produced in Hargeysa, some have permanent correspondents in the different regions of Somaliland. Yet, as far as I know, only occasionally were journalists from Hargeysa assigned to report from Lasanod.

²⁰ The situation changed again dramatically in October 2007, when Somaliland troops managed to retake Lasanod and most parts of Sool, aided by some Dhulbahante militias under Ahmed Abdi Habsade. The latter was the minister of interior of Puntland, but he fell out with the government in Garowe. Consequently, he rallied support against Puntland among his own constituency and finally turned to Somaliland for help (Höhne 2007c).

meetings and as part of the pastoral-nomadic life in northern Somalia. In post-colonial time freedom of speech could not be eliminated completely by the repressive regime of Siyad Barre. After the dictator was toppled, privately owned print media were established immediately all over Somalia and flourished – first as ‘wild flowers’, then in a more cultivated manner. Particularly in Somaliland that seceded from the rest of Somalia in 1991 the press has developed a government-critical profile. Recent events concerning the newspaper scene, such as the passage of a press law in early 2004 and the subsequent attempts of the government to repress all overly free and daring journalism, can be interpreted as part of the struggle to find the difficult balance between freedom and restriction of the press that is the basis of liberal democracy. The crackdown on Haatuf in 2007 and its repercussions – particularly the proposal of a new press and media bill on the part of the government – are just additional twists in this context; the government has made clear that it wishes more control and restrictions. As the new bill is with the parliament, media people and members of civil society are voicing their opposition. The negotiations about how much freedom of expression Somaliland needs are ongoing in 2008.

Many of the country’s journalists have their own personal experiences with the liberation struggle. This guerrilla legacy seems to add to their self-confidence vis-à-vis the government in difficult times. In this context a return to suppression à la Siyad Barre in Somaliland is rather improbable. Moreover, the comparison to the situation in the wider region shows that while government and media in Somaliland argue over the limits of freedom of expression, journalists in the neighbouring countries of Ethiopia and Eritrea, as well as in warlord-ruled and violence-ridden southern Somalia, are struggling for survival. According to the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), Eritrea is one of the ten most censored countries in the world. Currently, not a single private media outlet exists there (CPJ 2007). The situation for journalists in Ethiopia has deteriorated dramatically since the aborted democratic elections of May 2005. Journalists who do not practise strict self-censorship quickly find themselves charged with high treason and other serious crimes (Crawford 2006). In southern Somalia, particularly in Mogadishu, a number of well-respected journalists have been assassinated by one of the warring factions since the beginning of renewed large-scale fighting in early 2006.²¹ The situation worsened further in 2007. Seven journalists were murdered; more were killed or injured in crossfire or bombardment. A number of media outlets were raided by government troops and at least temporarily closed (CPJ 2007).

With regard to the contribution of the print media to nation-building, democratisation and political stabilisation in Somaliland, the article comes to a split conclusion. On the one hand, the print media have clearly provided a forum for controversial discussions between the government and the national opposition parties. The carrying out of sensitive political debates in public certainly contributes to critical reflection on the part of many citizens of

²¹ Updates in English on the freedom of the press and the situation of journalists all over Somalia are provided on the homepage of the National Union of Somali Journalists (<http://www.nusoj.org/>).

Somaliland about their country and its position in the wider region. Additionally, the newspapers are strongly involved in the continuing process of nation-building in the centre of Somaliland and provide a forum for the creation of a spatially limited but viable 'imagined community'. On the other hand, the coverage of the ongoing conflict in the east of Somaliland in particular displays a deliberate exclusion of alternative views and even systematic misinformation. The reports on events in the Sool region after December 2003 have shown that the newspapers in Hargeysa strongly favour an independent Somaliland. While this bias can be understood on the basis of the locality where the papers are printed and the personal background of editors and journalists, it nevertheless nurtures doubt about the professionalism of the media producers. In extreme situations the newspapers in Hargeysa do not even hesitate to print propaganda if it is deemed necessary for defending Somaliland's independence. Thereby, they contribute to conflict in the region instead of opening up channels for peaceful discussions about serious and immediate problems that have the potential to escalate into renewed violence in the region.

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Zusammenfassung

Dieser Artikel behandelt die Rolle von Zeitungen im Rahmen des gegenwärtigen Demokratisierungsprozesses in Somaliland. Wie Diskussionen über sensible und schwierige politische Themen in den Zeitungen zeigen, ist Meinungsfreiheit gewährleistet. Als Hintergrund sind dabei einerseits die traditionelle Redefreiheit in der somalischen Gesellschaft und andererseits die jüngere Bürgerkriegsvergangenheit Somalias von Bedeutung. Somaliland spaltete sich nach einem langen Guerillakrieg gegen das Regime von Mahamed Siyad Barre von Somalia ab. Viele der Zeitungsunternehmen und Journalisten haben aktiv an dem Guerillakrieg teilgenommen. Bis 2007 gelang es, in Somaliland eine stabile, *de facto* staatliche Ordnung aufzubauen. Doch Somaliland ist international nicht als Staat anerkannt. Auch innerhalb des Landes gibt es Gegner der Abspaltung von Somalia. Vor diesem Hintergrund wird klar, dass die Zeitungen in der Hauptstadt Hargeysa aktiv in einen Prozess des '*nation-building*' involviert sind. Dabei wird die Meinung eines signifikanten Teiles der Bevölkerung ausgeblendet. Dies trägt zur Erhöhung des politischen Konfliktpotentials in der Region bei.

Schlüsselwörter

Somalia, Somaliland, Printmedien, Demokratisierung, Konflikt

Résumé

Dans cet article, il est question du rôle tenu par les journaux dans le processus actuel de démocratisation en Somaliland. Dans leurs colonnes, des sujets politiques sensibles et difficiles sont débattus, ce qui montre que la liberté d'opinion existe. Ceci tient d'une part à la traditionnelle liberté d'expression de la société somalienne et d'autre part au passé récent, celui de la guerre civile en Somalie. Le Somaliland fit sécession de la Somalie après une longue guérilla menée contre le régime dictatorial de Mahamed Siyad Barre. Nombreux entrepreneurs de presse et journalistes ont activement pris part à cette guérilla. Le Somaliland a réussi jusqu'à présent à mettre en place *de facto* un Etat stable. Néanmoins le Somaliland n'est pas un Etat reconnu internationalement et au sein même du pays subsistent des opposants à l'indépendance. Les journaux de la capitale Hargeysa jouent un rôle actif dans le processus de '*nation building*', mais laissent de côté l'opinion de cette partie importante de la population. Ceci contribue à augmenter le risque d'un conflit politique dans cette région.

Mots clés

Somalie, Somaliland, médias imprimés, démocratisation, conflit

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